TO HEAR BETTER
Mark 7:31-37
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Archie Bunker never could hear very well. The sounds stimulated all the proper neurological responses; it's just that Archie had a notorious and distressingly familiar inability to hear what other people were saying to him.

One pithy vignette occurred in front of a television set. Archie and his idealistic, socially-aware son-in-law were about to watch TV. Mike turned on the Public channel to a program dealing with various threats to the environment. Archie walked over to the set and switched on the ball game. Mike protested, and what I thought was a very funny conversation ensued. Mike suggested that since they were both adults and each wished to watch something different, they ought at least to discuss the matter. Incredulous that anyone could possibly prefer looking at dirty lake water to the New York Yankees, Archie finally shut off the TV with a flourish and agreed to have a discussion. Mike launched into a long and eloquent presentation of his case: how important the issue of the environment is to everybody; how adults really should be attending to life and death concerns instead of games; how it was a one-time program and there was a ball game on TV everyday. Finally he concluded; it was obviously Archie's turn to respond. Slowly Archie got up from his chair, walked to the TV and turned it back on. "What are you doing?" Mike protested, and Archie answered, "You wanted a discussion. You had your discussion. Now I'm gonna watch a ball game."

It is not easy to hear what others are saying. There are many obstructions. Psychoanalyst Rollo May says that listening is our most neglected sense. (Freedom and Destiny, p. 166) In fact our inability to hear, or our unwillingness to listen, comes close, I believe, to a good, working definition for sin. It is what is wrong with us, essentially. We can't, or won't hear one another.

The first and fundamental skill seminaries teach eager young students in counseling curricula is how to listen. More often than not that task is first a matter of teaching the student to be quiet. What a rude awakening to learn that as counselors we didn't have the solutions to people's problems, that the solutions we thought we did have were probably wrong, and most critically, that the act of dispensing answers, like 25-year old ecclesiastical gurus, back - that is to say - when one knew all the answers, was itself detrimental to any therapeutic process. What we had to learn to do was shut up and listen. It was not easy and is not easy. Some of us never learned it. The trouble is most of us - clergy or laity - are relentless problem solvers. When someone presents a set of problematic circumstances we feel compelled to offer tidbits of helpful advice to resolve the problem or at least tidy it up a little. When someone expresses anxiety we are almost obsessive in our assurance that it will be OK. When someone tells us about a relational problem, we prescribe a book, or a way to deal with it. We are habitual problem-solvers. But on those occasions when we've summoned the strength to resist the urge to dispense resolutions, we have discovered that what was required of us was not sage advice, but a little active, therapeutic listening.

It is not an easy skill, but to be heard, to be listened to is a fundamental human need. It has to do with our sense of worth, our sense of self, our very sense of identity. People will find someone to listen - a husband or a friend, a psychiatrist or a bartender, a preacher or a call girl.

Jesus restored a man's ability to hear one time. The incident occurs early in his ministry as described in the Gospel according to Mark - the first account to have been written. He used two folk remedies of the day, known to have been employed by other healers: he placed his fingers in the man's ears and touched the man's tongue with his own saliva. The crowd was astonished at the restoration of the man's hearing and speaking. The astonishment is subtle, I believe. It was not the healing itself that so amazed the onlookers. Rather, what Mark wants us to understand, is that the people who actually witnessed the life of Jesus of Nazareth, identified what they saw with scriptural promises they had repeated by memory since childhood. One of them is a compellingly beautiful vision of God's kingdom written centuries before, by the prophet Isaiah. In times of oppression, military occupation and humiliation their old promises of a wonderful kingdom coming into the life of the world were terribly important to them.

Listen to what Isaiah wrote: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped: then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy." (Isaiah 35:5, 6)

Part of the restored wholeness in the human condition which happens when God's kingdom is present is that people will be able to see and hear and speak clearly. When Mark relates these stories of Jesus healing blind, deaf, and dumb people, he wants his readers to notice and be astonished, not at the wonderful miracles alone, but at what those signs are pointing to, namely the presence of God's kingdom on earth in Jesus Christ. In God's kingdom people can see clearly, and hear one another, and speak with one another. A characteristic of anyone, or any institution, which identifies itself with God's kingdom, therefore, will be a finely tuned sense of hearing.

The man Jesus healed was deaf, and there is a sense in which it always requires a bit of a miracle for people actually to hear one another. Sometimes we don't hear because we don't want to hear. A discouraging development in the 70's, during the campus troubles, was that the people who were most vociferous in demanding the right to be heard, shouted down voices which advocated positions different from their own. People gathered under the banner of free speech were unwilling to extend the right to be heard to representatives of the State Department, say, on the subject of Vietnam. Hugh T. Kerr, Editor of Theology Today, wrote, "The failure to communicate is not a problem of communication as if it could be solved by discovering better media. We have more media than we know what to do with. Our problem is that so many of us don't want to communicate in the first place, partly because we have nothing to say to each other and partly because everybody seems too mad." (Our Life in God's Light, p. 137)

Whenever I think of hearing difficulties I think automatically about my grandfather who was hard of hearing, and to whom I had to shout in order to be heard as a young boy. I was told, however, that he was a selective hearer, blessed with the uncanny ability not to hear most of what was said, but to pick up -with the power of a multi-directional microphone - anything anyone said which was not intended for his hearing. I have ever since regarded the ability to hear with great respect and careful uncertainty.

Sometimes we can't hear because we don't wish to hear what is being said. And sometimes we can't hear because we don't like whose doing the talking. The obsessive concentration on the self - self expression, self realization, self awareness of the past decade gave us the philosophical argument we needed to plug our ears to everyone. The New Narcissism told us that our own voice was the only one that mattered; that what we had to say needed to be said - shouted if necessary, not on the basis of any intrinsic merit, but simply because it was ours. No matter how innane, unintelligible, or selfish, an idea was worth expressing in the market place of ideas, simply because it belonged to us.

Fritz Pearls wrote a defiant little poem which caught up the incredible arrogance of that sentiment...

"I do my thing and you do your thing
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you and I am I:
If by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped."

Trouble is, it can be helped. Trouble is, the minute you adopt that rhetoric as a credo, there is no possibliity of communication with another human being.

One hundred years ago the present malaise was anticipated by Henrik Ibsen. Peer Gynt is visiting an "insane asylum" in Egypt and the director is explaining that the inmates are there because outside they cannot "be themselves". He says:

"Here we are ourselves with a vengeance:
Ourselves and nothing whatever but ourselves.
We go full steam through life under the pressure of self.
Each one shuts himself up in the cask of self,
Sinks to the bottom by self-fermentation,
Seals himself in with the bung of self,
And seasons in the well of self,
No one here weeps for the woes of others,
No one here listens to anyone else's ideas."

(see Rollo May, Freedom and Destiny, p. 143)

It is, of course, a denial of one's very identity, not to be heard. You have experienced it.....In the middle of a conversation it becomes evident that the person with whom you are talking isn't listening to you, perhaps isn't hearing you. It never feels very good when it happens. In fact, it is a kind of non verbal assault on your personhood. Not to be heard is to be told that you don't count, you don't matter, you don't exist.

And sometimes we don't hear because of deeply felt religious conviction. To know the absolute truth is always to have difficulty hearing a different position. Religious fanaticism always carries within it the seeds of tragedy because it cannot tolerate alternative points of view. It's not the trand of

morality of the Moral Majority that bothers me so much as the absolute certainty that any other position is immoral. I did something I have never done before this morning. Someone had left the television sitting on the kitchen counter and I turned it on. It was a mistake. Three preachers - on three channels - told me I was going to hell before I had my first cup of coffee - with such certainty. Paul Tournier once observed, "Nothing is more dangerous than to believe ourselves to be authentic interpreters of the divine will. This is the source of all brutal intolerance...and fanaticism." (The Violence Within, p. 29)

Communication...Dialogue...Speaking clearly and hearing clearly are not easy. In fcct, it may be a miracle of God's grace, a foretaste of glory divine, whenever it happens. It is, of course, more than a matter of transmitting information to one another. Listening is a way of loving. Hearing what another is saying is a way of affirming that person, acknowledging, and celebrating that person's worth. Our only existence is in relationship. Apart from other selfs, the solitary self begins to dissolve. When we listen to others we love in a creative and life affirming way.

We need to learn that simple lesson. We need, as a church, to learn to listen better to the world. When women in the church, for instance, say to us that our language, our titles, and our organizations, make them feel less than whole, we need to hear that and not respond by suggesting that it is inappropriate for people to feel that way. That is not listening...intentionally not hearing. When brother and sister Christians in Central America find voice to express fear and rage at the poverty and oppression in which they live, it is imperative that we start to hear that as well as the hope they want us to share with them. When young people express dismay at injustice, or marvelous optimism at a future which still looks wide open, we church folk need to listen.

We need, as individuals, to learn to listen to the silence of the world. The mystics have always known that secret. In silence one begins to hear an infinite variety of sounds. The late Thomas Merton wrote: "...if you go into solitude with a silent heart, the silence of creation will speak louder than the tongues of men and angels." (No Man Is an Island, p. 191)

The saints across the ages teach us that prayer is not so much saying words to God as it is listening to the world. God speaks, not in the sonorous tones of a Hollywood movie portrayal, but through his creation, in the voices of his people - and through our own inner voices which are audible only when we listen to the silence.

God's kingdom comes when we hear one another. Something of God's kingdom appears on earth when we listen, truly listen, to the joy another person wants desparately to share with someone, anyone. We advance God's kingdom when we resist the urge to tell our story and allow another person to tell us his or hers. God's kingdom exists when we muster strength to listen to the pain and hurt of others; when, in love, we hear grief and resist trying to make it right by mindless platitudes and simply, lovingly, listen when someone says, "Oh God, it hurts."

Each of us needs to be heard, to be affirmed and valued by being listened to. The Good News is that Jesus Christ restores hearing; and that each is heard by the Creator and Lord of all; that a bit of God's kingdom on earth is established when people, by his grace, hear one another. Amen.